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Request for Coverage

Angry Citizens To Be Heard at SAWS Board Meeting

When: Tuesday, April 3rd at 9:00 a.m.

Where: SAWS Headquarters, 2800 U.S. Hwy 281 North

What: Citizens of San Antonio and Bexar, and Medina and Bandera counties protest SAWS plans to extend service into the Hill Country

On January 17, 2007, SAWS mailed notices of their intention to amend their Certificate of Convenience and Necessity (CCN) to allow them to provide sewer utility service to parts of Bexar, Medina, and Kendall Counties that currently do not have sewer service.

The area proposed by SAWS is made up of the recharge and contributing zones of the Edwards Aquifer. The cheapest and most direct way to construct a sewer system in this area is to install the sewer lines in creek and stream beds. In that way, the utility could rely on gravity drainage and not install expensive pumping stations.

Installing this sewer system would impact northwest Bexar County and beyond in several ways. Construction of sewer lines in stream beds would devastate the country side. Hill Country creeks and streams would never recover from the destruction. Providing sewer service would open up northwest Bexar County and beyond to literally 10s of thousands of houses. This area would look exactly like Stone Oak and other areas where unbridled development was allowed with no regard for the environment, the health of the Edwards Aquifer, and the quality of life. High-density development in this area would further jam a thoroughfare system that TXDoT claims has no money for improvement or expansion for the next several decades.

Currently, development of this area is limited by the absence of utilities. Development is contingent on the availability of services, namely water, electricity, thoroughfare roads, and, very importantly, sewers. If a sewer system is not available, the density of development is limited because each lot would require a septic system. However, if developers are successful in convincing public utilities, such as SAWS, to install a sewer system at the public's expense, then high density development would be possible and private developers would not bear the burden (and cost) of providing this very important utility. The decision by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality on whether to approval this requested amendment will have a profound impact on northwest Bexar County and beyond.

Affected groups and individuals have requested a public hearing to contest SAWS plans to open this area to high-density development by providing sewer service, and will contest permitting by the TCEQ.

Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA), a coalition of thirty-nine organizations from Austin to Del Rio, all dedicated to maintaining the health of the aquatic ecosystem of Central Texas and the rivers and streams flowing across it through the Edwards Aquifer and toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Join the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance and member groups Helotes Heritage Association, AGUA, San Geronimo Watershed Alliance, San Geronimo Valley Alliance, Scenic Loop/Boerne Stage Alliance and others

Neighbors fear creek and aquifer pollution from sewage plant

"We can't stop development, but people from San Antonio should be concerned with SAWS (San Antonio Water System) putting waste into the Edwards Aquifer, and millions of gallons means no water for existing land owners and citizens of this area."

So said Randy Johnson, chair of a neighborhood meeting held Tuesday evening. Thirty-two residents of the San Geronimo Creek area nine miles west of Helotes met to discuss a wastewater treatment plant application that has been filed with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) by BP Real Estate Investments, Ltd., of Dallas. The developer is purchasing 1,700 acres bordering on Highway 16 (Bandera Road) and Park Road 37 in Medina and Bandera Counties near the Bexar County line. Plans call for 3,500 residential units including some cluster homes. Fourteen acres would be set aside for a school.

In Phase I of the development the sewage plant would discharge "treated wastewater at a volume not to exceed a daily average flow of 225,000 gallons per day" into an unnamed tributary, then directly into San Geronimo Creek and from there into the Medina River. A later phase would permit a discharge of up to 400,000 gallons per day. SAWS has reportedly agreed to take over the plant after it's up and running.

Many concerns were voiced, the primary one being the quality of the water to be discharged into San Geronimo Creek. The creek crosses the Edwards Aquifer, one source of drinking water for San Antonio residents and others, and at one point near the gravel pits near the intersection of Highways 211 and 471 the entire creek goes underground, better enabling the proposed discharge to seep directly into the aquifer.

Questions were raised about whether the chemistry of the creek water would change, adversely affecting drinking water for humans and providing an unhealthy home for fish and other indigenous aquatic life in the creek itself. Nobody was sure what would happen if the creek should flood, as it has been known to do after a heavy downpour, if wastewater were to be simultaneously discharged.

Long-time area resident and co-chair Neil Hernandez noted, "The new community will have hard water, and they will use water softeners, and with the amount of homes this would mean seven billion pounds of salt."

Other environmental concerns noted by Hernandez include the existence of three archaeological digs on the acreage as well as a stand of old cedar that provides favorite nesting places for the rare golden-cheeked warbler.

A subdivision of 3,500 residences would generate some 8,000 to 9,000 people at the national average of 2.4 persons per family. There is concern that air quality might suffer due to the number of vehicles involved.

The applicants were notified by TCEQ on September 5 that they had met application requirements. They then went to Bandera and Medina County courthouses and made a list of people for TCEQ to notify by mail. Mail notification criteria were to live within one mile of the actual discharge point and to own property abutting the unnamed tributary, according to Mario Hune, legislative aide to State Rep. David Leibowitz. Legal notice was published on September 13 in the Bandera Bulletin and was also published in a Hondo paper and a Medina County paper.